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SUBJECT: WEEKEND BOMBINGS MASK DECLINING ETA CAPABILITIES

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Bob Manzanares; reason 1.5 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. ETA terrorists carried out twelve bombings in two sets of coordinated attacks during the December 3-6 holiday weekend in Spain. The bombs consisted of small devices and there were no fatalities, though 10-20 people sustained minor injuries. The first series of bombings took place the evening of December 3 in five gas stations around Madrid, attacks evidently aimed at disrupting the exodus of holiday travelers streaming out of the city. ETA issued a warning before the second set of bombings, which took place at 1330 local time on December 6. Most observers are interpreting the attacks as an ETA show of force after months of dramatic reverses due to police arrests of top ETA militants. These bombings notwithstanding, Basque security officials, politicians, and journalists from across the political spectrum recently told us that ETA is in a steep decline from which it cannot recover. A thornier question is how the 130,000 militant Basque nationalists who currently accept ETA's methods can be drawn into the legitimate political process, and how nationalists and non-nationalists can co-exist in the face of radically different views on the Basque Region's political direction. End Summary.

//THE BOMBINGS//

[1](#)2. (U) After months of arrests of key ETA leaders and organizers by Spanish and French police, ETA struck back with two sets of simultaneous bombings in eight cities across Spain, including Madrid, Leon, Valladolid, Avila, Ciudad Real, Santillana del Mar (Cantabria), Alicante, and Malaga. Another explosive device was deactivated by police in Almeria and police responded to a false bomb threat against Popular Party (PP) headquarters in downtown Madrid. The first round of five explosions occurred on December 3 at approximately 1700 hours at gas stations along major exit routes from Madrid. The bombings were preceded by calls to the Basque newspaper "Gara" warning of the impending attacks. The selection of the targets was evidently intended to disrupt the large number of Madrid residents leaving the city for the long "Constitution Day" weekend.

[1](#)3. (U) On December 6, Spanish Constitution Day, "Gara" again received a telephone call warning that explosives had been placed in specific locations in Valladolid, Leon, Avila, and Santillana del Mar. This was followed by a second call warning of bombs in Alicante, Malaga, and Ciudad Real. Most of the explosives had been placed in restaurants near plazas and tourist sites. Police were able to evacuate potential victims from most of the sites, though a total of 10-20 persons suffered minor injuries in Santillana del Mar and Ciudad Real. Damage from the bombings varied, with some restaurants gutted by the blasts and other sites suffering scarcely any damage.

[1](#)4. (U) Police believe two separate ETA "comandos" (cells) carried out the bombings, with one cell organizing the Malaga, Alicante, and Ciudad Real attacks while the second cell placed devices in Avila, Valladolid, Leon, and Santillana del Mar. Police are uncertain which ETA cell carried out the Madrid bombings. Each of the devices contained approximately 300 grams of an explosive material, which police believe to be a substance identical to that typically employed by ETA. Police sources told reporters that the bombs were superior to recent ETA devices and that similarities among them point to a single, highly-qualified bomb maker.

//PROOF OF LIFE//

[1](#)5. (U) Most commentators are characterizing the attacks as a show of force by ETA to demonstrate that it retains a military and organizational capacity despite political setbacks and months of police arrests of top ETA militants by French and Spanish police. During the year, authorities have arrested dozens of terrorist suspects and members of ETA's logistical support network (including ETA leader Mikel Antza), six jailed ETA members wrote a letter calling for an end to the armed conflict, and Batasuna, ETA's political

wing, suggested peace talks might be possible (though Batasuna did not renounce ETA violence). The Constitution Day attacks are interpreted as the rejection by ETA fighters of calls for them to lay down their arms and pursue a political solution. At the same time, ETA's care to avoid fatalities, as it has for the last 18 months, is seen as an acknowledgement of their weak political position and the growing rejection of violent methods in the wake of the March 11 train bombings and prior ETA attacks.

//BASQUE OBSERVERS: ETA IN ITS FINAL PHASE//

16. (C) The ETA bombings came one day after Basque Government officials, Basque politicians, and journalists who cover ETA told us that conditions in the Basque region have shifted against ETA and that the organization is in a state of rapid and irreversible decline. Basque Government Deputy Adviser for Security Mikel Legarda said that over his six years in the Basque Interior Department Basque, Spanish, and French police have steadily chipped away at ETA's military base and that a definitive end to the conflict is very likely within the next few years. Criticizing the uniformly tough approach of the Aznar government, Legarda said it was important to be "practical" in this final phase, continuing to erode ETA capabilities while avoiding fanning the flames of radical nationalism. "I don't care whether I convince them of the rightness my position, as long as they are convinced that the armed struggle has been a total failure."

17. (C) Legarda and Basque Secretary General for External Affairs Inaki Aguirre told poloff that the ruling Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) is attempting to strangle political support for ETA by co-opting some of ETA's political positions. In particular, PNV leader Ibarretxe's effort to bring about a new agreement with Madrid expanding the scope of Basque autonomy (Plan Ibarretxe) is directly aimed at the 130,000 Basque voters who currently support Batasuna and, by implication, ETA's radical methods. Legarda and Aguirre said tolerance for ETA violence has declined in every sector of the Basque nationalist camp, with the exception of this group of voters located mostly in Guipuzcoa province, the bastion of radical Basque nationalism. The PNV believes that by proving it can gain greater independence from Madrid through legal methods it can discredit ETA among its core supporters and make a continuation of the armed struggle untenable. The PNV expects to lose a December 30 Basque Parliament vote on whether to move forward with Plan Ibarretxe, a loss the PNV intends to use to rally nationalist support (including from Batasuna supporters) during Basque regional elections in May 2005.

//NON-NATIONALIST VIEWS ON ETA AND BASQUE NATIONALISM//

18. (C) Non-nationalist interlocutors in the PP and the Socialist Party agreed with the PNV's analysis of declining popular support for ETA and with the notion that ETA is in its last years, but strongly disagreed with the PNV's description of the motives behind Plan Ibarretxe. Santiago Abascal, a PP youth leader and member of the Basque Parliament, described the PNV to poloff as "enemies, not political adversaries" and insisted that Plan Ibarretxe was a thinly disguised effort by the PNV to solidify its political control over the Basque Region at the expense of other groupings. Jon Juaristi, a prominent academic from a Basque nationalist family who has gradually shifted to anti-nationalist positions, said the PNV can't fathom the possibility of losing political control in the Basque Region and will compromise with ETA as needed in order to retain that control. Juaristi asserted that the PNV and other nationalist groups consider ETA "part of the family" and, while genuinely against ETA violence, they are loath to see ETA firmly crushed by Spanish security forces. Both Juaristi and Abascal have been identified as targets in ETA documents seized by police.

//CAN A MILITANT ETA SURVIVE?//

19. (C) Basque journalist and long-time ETA observer Oscar Beltran told poloff that he expects to "stop having to write about ETA in less than five years." He said that ETA terrorist leader Josu Ternera is near death from a medical condition, creating more instability at the top of the organization. Beltran's fear is that ETA will respond as it has in past crises, by bringing back semi-retired cadres from Latin America to reconstitute the organization. Beltran, a specialist on ETA relations with Latin American revolutionaries, said that ETA members who worked with Nicaragua's Sandinistas form a particularly skilled group that could reestablish order and train new members in basic operational methods. Interestingly, Beltran had heard rumors within radical circles that with the disappearance of France as a safe-haven and the decline of French-language instruction in Basque schools, more and more ETA activists are establishing themselves in the United Kingdom while not in action. Though ETA has the power to extend its life through such adaptations, Beltran ventured that nothing can

save it from the decline in nationalist fervor in the Basque Country (except among core ETA supporters) coupled with improved effectiveness by security forces.

//COMMENT//

10. (C) ETA is clearly in a state of decline, but the small group of radicals (fielding perhaps no more than 50 operatives) continues to cast a long shadow over the Basque political landscape. Conversations with various sectors revealed a continuing deep insecurity and mistrust among the different political groups, divisions based on radically different views of national identity and an ingrained sense of victimhood within all the major factions. With the population nearly evenly divided between nationalists and non-nationalists, there is little likelihood of change in the political equation that has guaranteed PNV power since the fall of Franco, but power in the face of a strong opposition backed by Madrid. The good news is that, to a greater extent than at any time in the last 30 years, observers are beginning to speak of the post-ETA era as inevitable, rather than a desirable, but unlikely eventuality.
MANZANARES